

THE INVISIBLE ARSON TRUST

BY "JOCK" BELLAIRS.

The other day a man left the train in Nevada, Mo., and lugging two heavy suit cases made his way to one of the large millinery stores in the town. He left the same evening minus the grips. Citizens who noted the matter informed the authorities.

Investigation revealed that the store was conducted by a woman. Business had been poor and the place was on the verge of bankruptcy. Just a few words of accusation and the woman exposed to the officials the existence of an arson business as broad as the land and as cunning as any scheme ever devised by man.

Instantly insurance companies and police departments became very busy. One arrest was made. Bend was at once given and the man accused promptly dropped from view. He is being sought now all over the United States that there may be forced from him information which would lead to the prosecution of the real heads, the backers of the illegal enterprise. This is what the business woman exposed.

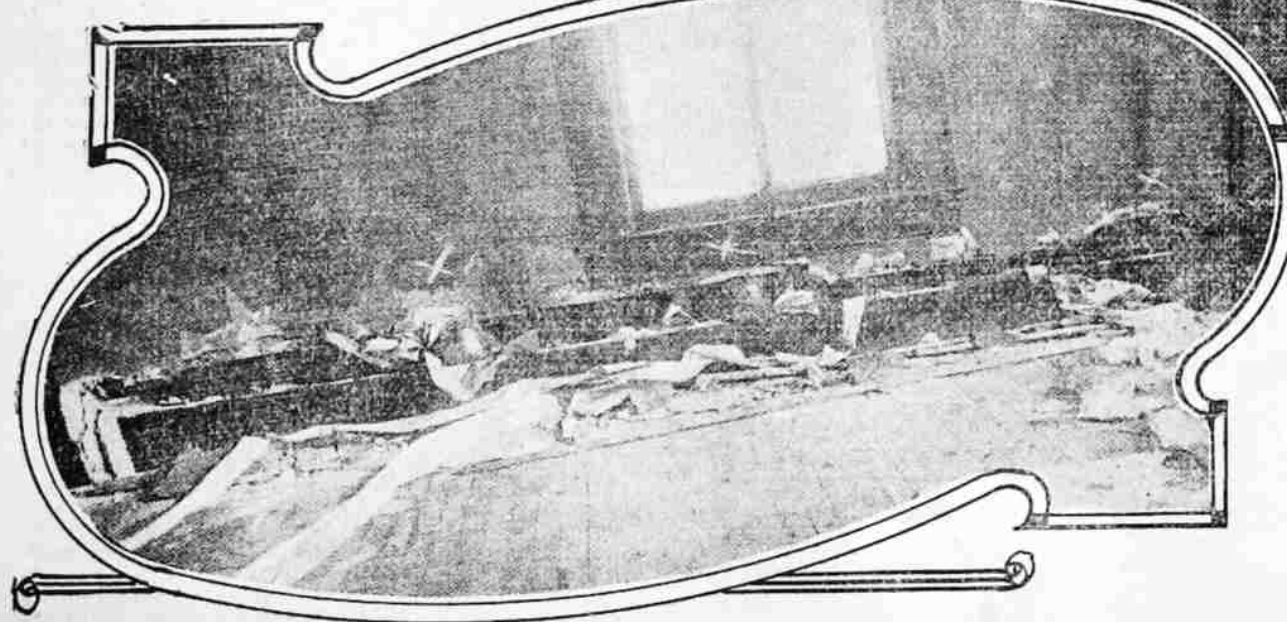
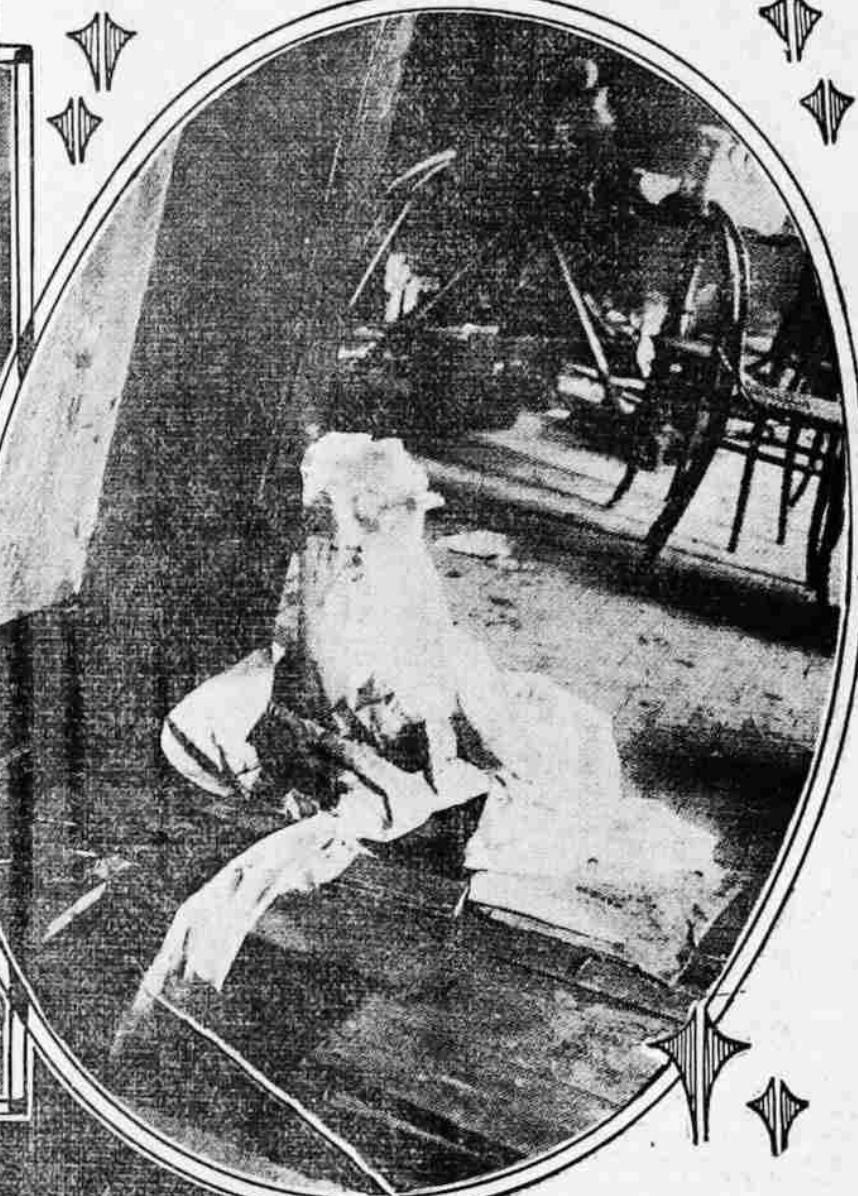
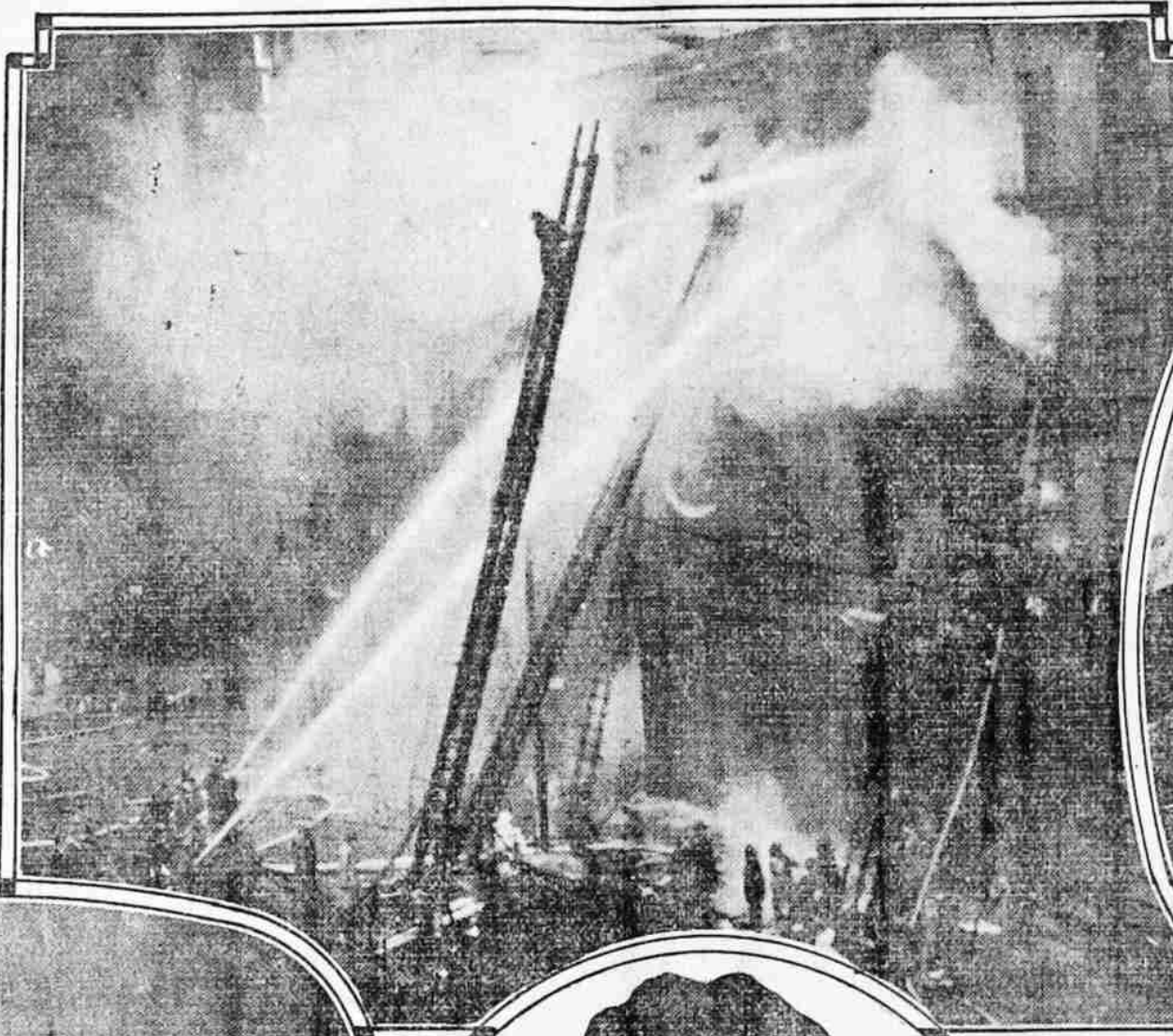
Her credit had been gradually diminishing. She succeeded in concealing this from her home folks and a few small tradesmen. But not from larger creditors, who withheld credit, nor from the heads of the arson organization. She received a visit one day from a well-dressed man. He cautioned her

special detail consisting of two or more men whose duty it is to investigate fires in conjunction with private detective agencies employed by the insurance companies. Numerous arrests have been made in New York, Boston, Cincinnati, Chicago, St. Louis and other places.

ARSON CASES HARD TO RUN DOWN.

Arson is hard to run down. There are few recorded instances of conviction. H. H. Holmes eked a good living and an easy one insuring persons and then bringing about their deaths by violence. He was hanged in Philadelphia. The criminal career of Jim French, soon to be released from Leavenworth Federal Prison, began as the head of an arson gang. His operations were in Missouri and the running to earth of this gang was about the first big work ever falling to the lot of William J. Burns. He assisted Tom Furlong in the inquiries. French got five years imprisonment. These two instances stand almost alone.

Arson for gain is common. Arson for revenge and arson because of mania are insignificant compared to the first. Investigation of arson is quite interesting, according to a detective who has become famed because of his work in this regard. But it is decidedly methodical. Conviction for arson is next to impossible. Consequently it may be termed a profitable and flourishing industry. The police of the great cities have



against any excitement or exposure and said he had come from friends to help her out.

"We have noted your credit go down," he said. "We want to help you."

Then he asked what stock she had on hand and how much insurance she carried. He developed that she had insurance ample to cover the amount of stock. She owned the building, save for a deed of trust upon it. Then he made known to her how she could retrieve all her losses at one swoop, take no chances, and get enough ahead to start over again or retire as she saw fit. She was to order additional stock, pledging jewelry, etcetera, to get it, and to double the insurance. Then most of the valuable stock would be sneaked out and either stored at a place to be selected by her or shipped by the arson syndicate. When this was done the concern he represented would send a man to fire the building. She need not be near nor know what was happening. All she had to do was to collect the insurance and give the arson crew 50 per cent of the net gain.

The scheme appealed to her and she agreed. The agreement had been carried out up to the point of the fire. The man had brought the two grips for the use of the incendiary and the grips were then hidden in a corner of the store. They were seized and were found to contain oils, fuses and inflammable substances. These were to be spread about the store by the fire bug who was to have arrived two days later

no means of estimating what the arson business amounts to in a year. But it runs up into seven figures. Illinois is now wrestling with an arson syndicate.

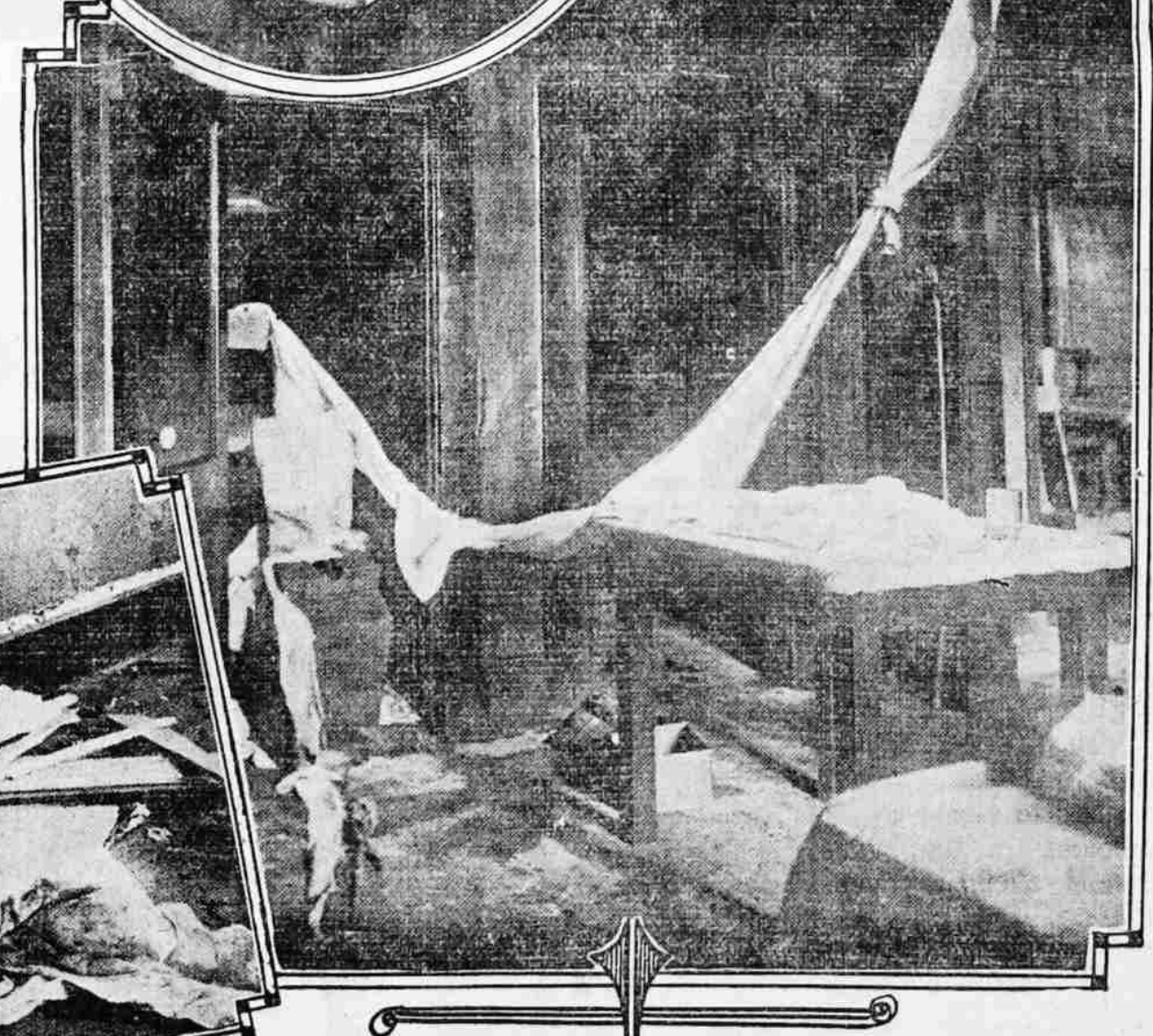
What follows is from the pen of a detective sergeant who has been a student of the subject for years and who has been the investigator of over 500 fires. It gives a clearer insight into the industry than is possible from a stranger to the real work.

"Incendiarism, from its motions, may be classed into three general kinds: for pleasure, hatred or gain. These again may be subdivided into several smaller classes as occasion requires.

"The first named 's by far the most difficult to contend with on ac-

nessing the conflagration and the excitement which generally follows. A man recently arrested in St. Louis after starting two fires was of this class. These fires were started in lumber yards, twenty minutes apart. We have counterparts of this man in a youth of 18, who started twelve fires in the plant of old St. Louis Coffin Company, and an employee of a carpet concern who destroyed his employer's store by the use of gunpowder and a slow fuse which he timed so as to enable him to bring his family to witness the flames which left him out of employment and made his family destitute.

"A particularly dangerous type of this class is the fellow who frequently starts fires at his place of



UPPER left—A typical fire scene. Center—James French, a type of incendiary. He is one of the few men who have been convicted for arson. Other scenes shown are photographs taken by Photographer Brockmeyer, East St. Louis, for the Illinois State Fire Marshal, showing the interior of a building after a fire had been put out there. It was alleged that oil-soaked waste was scattered through the building. No one was convicted for the fire, although several were arrested.

know, or at least did not till lately, that the deed of trust is held by a trusted friend, an accomplice or a relative of the fire bug and that the incendiary on an outlay of \$1,500, allowing \$100 for premiums and expenses, has collected \$3,200 and still owns the lot. This sort of fellow seldom takes more than two or three weeks to complete his work in one given transaction. And he is ready soon to repeat the work in another section under another name.

"I have known some hard working people, who having purchased homes of the foregoing type on time payments, and after investing their life savings in the venture, fall by stress of circumstances to meet payments and becoming discouraged, resort to arson in a vain endeavor to recover some of the money they had so faithfully invested.

"I know one poor fellow who, having purchased a frame house on time payments in the suburbs of a big city, and who kept up the payments religiously for five or six years until, because of insanitary conditions his family was ravaged by malaria, diphtheria and typhoid fever. Their means were exhausted. When his credit was gone in the neighborhood he lost his position. Meantime his eldest son died and his wife and remaining children went to live with relatives in the country. He finally secured work in an adjoining town. It prevented his getting to his home often than once a month. He vainly tried to either rent or to sell the place. The mortgage became about due. He grew desperate. Early one morning neighbors found the place afire. He attracted other neighbors and the fire was extinguished. Investigation disclosed that the house had been fired in seven places, one fire being started just behind the bed on which the owner was supposed to have slept. The use of a fire proof plaster had prevented the spread of the fire and exposed the incendiary. The poor fellow got neither insurance nor home.

"Victims of circumstances such as this, seldom succeed in bringing about a successful fire. The practical business of incendiarism is the product of careful training and application. I know of an entire family who have grown wealthy through arson and who have successfully avoided the law for the past eighteen years, during which time, we know they have manipulated several successful fires."

"It pays to be a good listener." "Yes. I know a good listener who draws a salary simply by being an audience while his boss tries out funny stories on him."

sive insurance, then at a favorable time when everything is fully prepared and in readiness the match is applied and a successful fire results.

It is surprising how minutely the details for these fires are arranged. In brick or other substantial buildings, gasoline or some other explosive, is generally used to spread the flames throughout the building and accelerate the destruction of the contents. This is essential in the business and central sections of the city, where the fire is liable to be discovered before it gains much headway and would probably be extinguished before it did any great damage. Modern sprinkler-protected buildings are an invaluable safeguard against this sort of arson. I know of a recent case where eight separate fires were started on one floor of a building, simultaneously, accompanied by sufficient explosives to wreck every door and window in the place. The heat and explosives set the sprinklers in action and prevented all the fires from spreading enough to communicate with any of the others. A few months previous to this fire the insurance on the place had been doubled with no visible increase of stock or equipment.

SUBURBAN FIRE BUG GETS BIG INSURANCE.

"Another type of this class is the fellow who confines his operations entirely to the suburbs, usually ac-

quiring an isolated frame dwelling remote from an engine house or other fire protection. If convenient he purchases the premises for a moderate sum, say \$1,500. Through a dishonest real estate man, he negotiates a bogus deed of trust for \$2,000 on the property and on the strength of this deed he readily obtains \$2,500 insurance on the place. He then places \$2,000 on his furniture and household goods, this being invariably placed with some out of the way real estate agent, who in turn has it written up by some company he favors. In the meantime the fire bug has moved loads of practically valueless furniture, including some kind of a piano and bed skeletons, into the place. Under the guise of painting he thoroughly saturates the floors and woodwork of the building with some highly inflammable oil, or preparations, and in due time, during the absence of his family, usually between 1 and 2 a. m. he touches it off. And all that remains next morning is the keyboard of the piano, the frames and springs of the beds, as the frail edifice would be shattered, and visible evidence of his guilt strewn around. With the saturation process he is sure of his work. The insurance adjuster promptly pays the holder of the deed of trust his \$2,000 and prizes himself on his work if he compromises the other policies for \$1,200. He does not

and was to do all the rest. This seizure was the nearest approach the police had ever made towards the organized incendiaries which every department knows exists. In fact, there is in every police department of the country a

count of the seeming lack of motive, the incendiary being some irresponsible pyromaniac who through some prenatal influence, or from some injury or circumstance, is impelled at certain times to start fires for the pleasure which he derives in wit-

DESTRUCTION BY FIRES THROUGH AVENGERS.

"The second general class is the avenger or destroyer, who through hatred, envy, jealousy or some kindred desire, destroys, by fire, the life or property of his victim. Fortu-